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Chapter 4

Monsters on the Verandah of Realism

Virginia Woolf’s Empire Exhibition

Of Chained Beasts and Bloated Carcasses

Of all Edwardian English novelists, Arnold Bennett perhaps made the fullest transition to modernist practice by the end of his career in novels such as Riceyman Steps, for which he won the James Tait Black Prize. Yet his fiction is not usually read in these terms, and in his most significant work, The Old Wives’ Tale, the modernist element emerges at best fitfully. It appears in narrative moments such as the episode titled “Elephant” in which allegory overruns realistic exposition and narrative focus is divided, both violations of Bennett’s theoretical prescriptions in The Author’s Craft. Even though Bennett’s fiction tends not to be read as a part of British literary modernism, his work is frequently perceived through the lens of modernist criticism, and Bennett is best known as the object of Virginia Woolf’s denunciation in the several essays titled “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” published in the early 1920s. In these essays Woolf defines modernist (or “Georgian”) literary practice against the anemic realism of her Edwardian predecessors, arguing that “the prevailing sound of the Georgian age” is the violent noise of Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922), and, perhaps, her own inchoate Mrs. Dalloway (1925) smashing literary convention. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Character in Fiction,” Woolf expropriates and elaborates in the context of literary stylistics Bennett’s theme in the “Elephant” chapter of The Old Wives’ Tale, that such “crashing and destruction” are attendant upon the yielding of one generation to the next. Woolf’s essays memorably turn Bennett into the object rather than author of such a scene of violence.

Not only does Woolf return to this motif of Bennett’s The Old Wives’ Tale
in *The Waves* (1931), the novel that Raymond Williams, among others, treats as Woolf’s most representatively modernist text, she takes up the double figuration of the elephant in Bennett’s chapter as a violent and dissident force and as a rotten burden. Louis, the son of a colonial businessman, repeatedly gives voice to a menacing elephantine vision throughout the novel: “The beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps.” As a child, the artist-figure Bernard imagines that issuing from the English undergrowth in which he plays are “warm gusts of decomposing leaves, of rotting vegetation. We are in a swamp now; in a malarial jungle. There is an elephant white with maggots, killed by an arrow shot dead in its eye.” Bernard’s childhood image reappears later in the rhetoric of the grown Rhoda, where, despite its maturity, it remains a partially formed image fashioned within England’s domestic spaces. In Rhoda’s attempt to express admiration for Percival—“the violent last of the British imperialists”—the rotting elephant serves as an ironic figure that seems to undermine a pretentious imperial rhetoric of enlightenment:

Rhoda gathers “the outermost parts of the earth”—pale shadows on the utmost horizon, India for instance, rise into our purview. The world that had been shrivelled, rounds itself; remote provinces are fetched up out of darkness; we see muddy roads, twisted jungle, swarms of men, and the vulture that feeds on some bloated carcass as within our scope, part of our proud and splendid province.

It is precisely in the volatile space between visions of empire as integrated or “rounded” totality and of its irremediable attenuation or dissolution that I locate Woolf’s engagement with the imperial menagerie in this chapter. Though Woolf visited the zoo in Regent’s Park and attended a series of colonial and imperial exhibitions, her writing renders exotic animals not in the
form she encountered them historically, as actors in imperial pageants, but rather as emblems or symbols, both private (in *The Years* [1937]) and public (in “Thunder at Wembley”). Woolf both distanced herself from historical forms of the imperial menagerie and maintained an intimacy with its symbolic repertoire. Likewise, insofar as we can understand Virginia Woolf to be “against empire,” to use Kathy J. Phillips’s phrase,9 she should be located “against” empire in a sense of the word that signifies as much her proximity to and adjunction with empire as it does her well-known opposition, voiced late in her career in *Three Guineas* (1938), to “the desire to impose ‘our’ civilization or ‘our’ dominion upon other people.”10 In this chapter I focus especially on her challenges to “Edwardian” realism in 1924, the year of the Empire Exhibition, of Woolf’s expansion of her famous essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” as “Character in Fiction,” and of the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway.* The first section discusses the figure of a hybridized, elephantine body Woolf introduces at the conclusion of *The Years,* highlighting the complex dynamic of imperial holism and fragmentation this zoological conglomeration signals. A similarly peculiar assemblage of strange beasts and other exotica appeared under the mark of realism at the Empire Exhibition of 1924, which Virginia Woolf and her friend E. M. Forster discussed in a set of critical essays. In her piece on the exhibition, Woolf treats the dominant mode of realism as a kind of praxis that is complicit with the totalizing aims of imperialism, aims openly acknowledged at the 1924 Empire Exhibition at Wembley. Her essay declines to respect the established conventions of Wembley’s realism, instead recasting the exhibition as itself a series of resolutely domestic displays that gather creatures of all sorts, but especially the English, for viewing. Woolf in effect turns one kind of exhibition into another, simultaneously reversing the polarity of the logic governing the imperial menagerie.

Woolf’s refusal to observe Wembley’s limits of realism is couched in prose that deliberately disrupts stylistic continuity in such a way to signal that “The Empire is perishing.”11 Georgian society inherited not only a tradition of large-scale imperial exhibition but also a series of totalizing metaphors that describe the empire. Just as she highlights the arbitrariness of exhibitionary conventions and the unstable character of the elephant, whether it is a menace in chains or a morbid corpse, so also Woolf refigures these metaphors in the geometric emphases of *Mrs. Dalloway,* *The Years,* and *The Waves,* her most overtly “imperialist” novel.12 In particular, Woolf renders the circle, ring, or chain that signifies holism and integration13—and that binds Louis’s elephant on the beach—in the end fractured, dissolved, or dispersed in fragments.
Chapter 4

Drawing-Room Monsters and Civilization’s Ellipses

Woolf’s fiction is punctuated by the play between totality and fragmentation or decay, from the leaden circles that expand and dissolve throughout Mrs. Dalloway to the gramophone in Between the Acts (1941) that spins a record blaring “Unity-Dispersity. It gurgled Un . . . dis . . .”14 For Woolf, the inevitable falling away from a vision of the whole prepares the ground for art’s interventions.15 From “Character in Fiction,” in which Woolf despair of “catching” the essence of Mrs. Brown in fiction but demands that we “tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure” as an approximation of her,16 to Miss La Trobe’s play in Between the Acts, which plies its audience with interrogatives about how “civilization [might] be built by . . . orts, scraps, and fragments,”17 the work of the aesthetic is identified with the partial, the fragmentary, the unfinished sentence that is left to trail off into ellipses. Woolf’s fictional assemblages are partial collections, but the fragmentary or the incomplete always emerges against a horizon of the whole. At Delia and Patrick’s party at the close of The Years, for instance, a curious collection of exotic and domestic figures makes a surprising appearance: “[the partygoers] had been playing a game. Each of them had drawn a different part of a picture. On top there was a woman’s head like Queen Alexandra, with a fuzz of little curls; then a bird’s neck; the body of a tiger; and stout elephant’s legs dressed in child’s drawers completed the picture.”18 This collection is presented as a “completed picture” but is plainly absurd by prevailing conventions. This strange party game, which constructs bourgeois amusement around other lands’ beasts and another era’s queen, can be understood either as simply one more detail in a novel the modus operandi of which is a refusal to be selective in the images it offers, or as an image that might stand even for the novel as a whole. To put this minor crux another way: this monster might be understood as the detritus of civilization, textual ephemera to be disregarded by the reader, or the very stuff—“orts, scraps, and fragments”—from which civilization is built.

The Years itself offers an assemblage of incongruous moments in much the way the partygoers construct the strange beast for their diversion. The parade of figures and historical moments surrounding the Pargiter family in the novel functions not only as a palimpsestic progress, with one era superseding and laying to rest the previous, but also as a kind of national montage, in which England is simultaneously composed of elements Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian, as the novel draws together moments ranging from 1880 to 1936. With Queen Alexandra perversely at its helm, the simul-
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taneously exotic and domestic animal describes in caricature the Edwardian empire, a peculiar aggregation of discrete geographical and cultural locations. The Bengal tiger is, of course, the animal that stands for India in the official iconography of empire, though the elephant—as in Household Words and All the Year Round—can just as easily stand in as the unofficial representative of Eastern spaces or empire in its totality. Those “stout elephant legs” seem, moreover, to anticipate the reflections on the Edwardian years offered by George Orwell’s narrator George Bowling in Coming Up for Air (1939), a novel contemporary with The Years and set just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Bowling recalls the opening decade of the twentieth century as a period characterized by “a feeling of continuity. . . . What [the Edwardians] didn’t know was that the order of things could change. . . . [The Edwardian Era strikes one as] a settled period, a period when civilisation seems to stand on its four legs like an elephant. . . . They didn’t feel the ground they stood on shifting under their feet.”19 Woolf’s elephant legs signal a similar sense of false stability on the verge of a second great war, but the legs in children’s “drawers” might also encode an anxiety about Mother England’s imperial children.

If the diversionary figure at Patrick and Delia’s party appears as a metaphor for Woolf’s novel, as an emblem of the English state, or even as a symbol of a modernist art that relies in part upon montage for its defamiliarizing effects, it also serves as a figure for the hybrid character of twentieth-century England. A number of moments in “Present Day” suggest that English culture is changing as the circuits of a wider imperial world return to England objects, people, and energies. Before the party in London, Maggie mistakes a conversation about Delia’s fête for a discussion about Africa.20 Kitty Lasswade is mistaken for the wife of the viceroy of India.21 North Pargiter, just returned from Africa, finds himself “falling under their [English] weight. . . . Could nothing be done about it? he asked himself. Nothing short of revolution, he thought.”22 Yet he complains to Eleanor of a revolution of sorts, accusing the English of having “spoilt England while I’ve been away.”23 An “Indian in a pink turban”—“One of Eleanor’s Indians”—preoccupies the attention of the partygoers.24 And Eleanor complains, “India’s nothing nowadays . . . Travel’s so easy. You just take a ticket; just get on board ship. . . . But what I want to see before I die . . . is something different. . . . another kind of civilisation.”25 India, and the empire more generally, have come to seem strangely proximate to England, and England’s civilization appears not so different from India’s after all. The confusions of England with Africa, the fear that England has been spoiled, the longing for revolution, the desire for “another kind of
"civilisation" increasingly convey the sense that English identities are now inextricably bound up with the distant spaces England claims as its own. Yet the sheet of paper with the peculiar sketch “of the monster’s person,” if it does in fact serve as a figure of hybridity in the narrative discourse, is hardly taken for such an emblem by those in the story, for “they all laughed again," “laughed, laughed, laughed.” The hilarity of the group seems to overwhelm the beast’s symbolic subtleties in *The Years*, and between the careful selectivity of the discourse and the broad laughter of the characters it becomes difficult to determine just what to make of the image.

The difficulty and necessity of reading a figure such as the hybrid animal at Delia’s party is Woolf’s theme in “The Symbol” (1941), a story whose first glimmerings in Woolf’s diary are contemporaneous with the publication of *The Years*. In this late narrative, an anonymous protagonist in the Alps writes a letter to her sister in Birmingham as she watches a string of climbers traverse a mountain. “The mountain,” the lady wrote, sitting on the balcony of the hotel, ‘is a symbol...” The narrator—as opposed to “the lady”—in a passage Woolf later canceled, observes that the mountain “was a menace: something cleft in the mind like two parts of a broken disk: two numbers: two numbers that cannot be added: a problem that is insoluble.” If the mountain is a “problem” for the narrator, it is likewise a problem for the protagonist, who cannot finish her sentence: “She had written the mountain was a symbol. But of what?” This question takes her letter into the realm of free association. The mountain might have a personal resonance by representing an ambition for adventure that probably has a familial origin, as she writes to her sister:

> We come of course of an Anglo Indian family. I can still imagine, from hearing stories told, how people live in other parts of the world. I can see mud huts; and savages; I can see elephants drinking at pools. So many of our uncles and cousins were explorers. I have always had a great desire to explore for myself. But of course, when the time came it seemed more sensible, considering our long engagement, to marry.

The lady writing her letter constructs a tenuous and speculative analogy between the ellipses in her definition of the mountain-symbol—her inability to determine for what the mountain stands—and her decision not to explore “other parts of the world.” If the mountain seems to cleave “the mind like two parts of a broken disk,” one of those parts represents the reality behind the stories of “mud huts; and savages; [and] elephants drinking at pools.”
while the other represents marriage and domestic life. The lady’s letter is interrupted as the climbers whom she watches while writing disappear into a crevasse in the mountain and perish. When she returns to her letter again later in the evening, she describes their deaths and then ends her letter: “The old clichés will come in very handy. They died trying to climb the mountain . . . And the peasants brought spring flowers to lay upon their graves. They died in an attempt to discover . . . ’ There seemed no fitting conclusion.”

Like the author’s initial failure to finish her sentence, “The mountain is a symbol . . . ,” and like the ineffable object of the climbers’ venture, “The Symbol” itself seems unable to draw any definite conclusions about the meaning of the mountain. This tendency in the story renders the effect sought by Woolf’s original design, for she initially titled the story “Inconclusions.” The plural construction of the working title indicates not only the protagonist’s inability to conclude her inquiries into the symbolic character of the mountain but also the narrative’s inconclusiveness as well. In shifting the title away from an emphasis on the referent (which is disappointingly indeterminate in this case) to the sign and its signifying tendencies (the mountain that calls up a split between domestic existence and “other parts of the world”), Woolf suggests that narrative need not supply—or even intend—precise meanings for the symbols it introduces for those symbols to produce significant effects. The significance of the mountain—what the mountain does as opposed to what it means, or what it is a symbol of—unfolds in the “cleft in the mind” the mountain produces between “marriage” and Indian “exploration.” The significance of the climbers’ doomed efforts toward objectless discovery rests, perhaps, in putting paid to the conviction that “The old clichés will come in very handy” (for they do not). And though “The Symbol” may not draw any conclusions in itself, its significance lies in shifting our critical attention away from “an attempt to discover [something]” in Woolf’s symbols and toward an analysis of the effects and energies the symbol as a formal nodal point gathers into its purview.

The symbol in The Years—the composite figure of Queen Alexandra, the bird’s neck, the tiger’s body, and the elephant legs in children’s “drawers”—provides what is false, excessive, and unreal: “[Peggy] stopped laughing; her lips smoothed themselves out. But her laughter had had some strange effect on her. It had relaxed her, enlarged her. She felt, or rather she saw, not a place, but a state of being, in which there was real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole, vast, and free.” In Peggy’s eyes, the hybrid figure elicits from the company a laughter that is inauthentic; yet its very inauthenticity contrasts with a glimpse of new order in which the
fractured world—a place in which things are cleft and broken, as in “The Symbol”—can be described as an integrated totality, a totality that, though vast, is conceivable in terms of “real laughter,” “real happiness,” and real liberty. This glimpse provokes her to attempt to describe her vision to the others: “Look here . . . ’ she began. She wanted to express something that she felt to be very important; about a world in which people were whole, in which people were free . . . But they were laughing; she was serious. ‘Look here . . . ’ she began again.” Peggy’s vision is unutterably vague, and she herself discovers that “She had nothing to say when it came to the point, and yet she had to speak.” Yet her response to the image of “the monster” and the laughter that image provokes recalls the impact of the mountain on “the lady” in “The Symbol”: speech and writing tail off into ellipses; the symbol is cloven from its referent as the mind is riven like the broken halves of a disk; people are not whole; and indeed the world itself appears “fractured.” The laughter at the party signifies something apart from “real happiness” or freedom, the proper objects of its reference.

Peggy’s desire to discover “not a place, but a state of being” in which the world is “whole, vast, and free” emerges in the context of the manifold confusions of England with the imperial spaces it claims as its own. The party is given at the home of Delia and Patrick, the latter of whom is “the most King-resecting, Empire-admiring of country gentlemen” and who asserts both that “we [Irish] are savages compared with you [English]” and that the Irish will “be glad enough to join the Empire again, I assure you.” Peggy’s vision of a “vast” totality might, in this context, be taken as an imperialist one, were it not for the fact that she complains about the cowardice of those friends and family members at the party who live out conventional existences—making small fortunes in the colonies, returning to England, marrying, and writing books—“instead of living . . . living differently, differently.” Because imprecise, Peggy’s vision is reduced to a declaration of sheer difference; in its attenuated linguistic form, Peggy’s desire can find expression only inadequately. The possibility of a “real” and numinous world beyond language, in which symbol and referent coincide and “fractured world” and subjects are both “whole . . . and free,” appears finally as a horizon beyond language—and, indeed, beyond what the monstrous beast can express without ambiguity.

Given the emphasis on imperialism and the appearance of its zoological traces at the party, it might be tempting to read Peggy’s impression of a world that is whole yet free and in which people themselves are whole, as anticipating, say, Frantz Fanon’s desire to “help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment”
and his theme of “the disalienation of the black man.” This surely would be to miss the point, however. Among other failures of her imagination, Peggy does not really engage the colonized, Fanon’s “black man,” at all; her emphasis is on the English “living differently”: hers is a categorically domestic vision. Fanon, moreover, finds the “disalienation” and freedom of the “black man” emerging out of a violent embrace of the cultural fragmentation enjoined upon the Algerians by the manichean world picture of the colonizers: “National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.”

Fanon imagines not a fractured world made whole but an Africa disarticulated from an imperial worldview that desires to see the globe made whole in the imperialists’ image—from a worldview, in other words, like Peggy’s.

In another sense, though, Peggy may glimpse beyond the strategic manicheanism of Fanon to something like what Homi Bhabha describes as an arena “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities,” in which “moments or processes . . . are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.” In exhorting her contemporaries to live differently, Peggy seems to imagine such a moment: “not a place, but a state of being.” Such a “state of being” might perhaps be understood to anticipate what Bhabha calls the “in-between” of culture that constitutes “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”

In this sense, the hybrid, anthropomorphic animal—a laughable figure to the company assembled at Delia and Patrick’s party—may be such a “new sign of identity,” though the referent for the sign (nothing so specific as Fanon’s “black man,” for example) eludes even Peggy, who intuits but cannot articulate its significance.

The monstrous figure collectively produced at the party can be read to have a significance—as opposed to a meaning—that anticipates a normative social totality in which the promise of hybridity is realized as a free world where “people [are] whole,” disalienated. This is Peggy’s vision, but it is ineffable, even sublime, and her efforts to articulate the vision result in exhaustion and retreat: “She stopped. There was the vision still, but she had not grasped it. She had broken off only a little fragment of what she meant to say, and she had made her brother angry. Yet there it hung before her, the thing she had seen, the thing she had not said. . . . She had not said it, but she had tried to say it.” The impulse toward a “graspable” totality is met by a contrary tendency that results in “only a little fragment.” Peggy herself
experiences such an antithetical moment, frozen between totalizing vision and fragmentation, as something melancholy, lonely: “Yes, it was over; it was destroyed, she felt. Directly something got together, it broke. She had a feeling of desolation. And then you have to pick up the pieces, and make something new, something different, she thought, and crossed the room, and joined the foreigner.” In this case, the antithesis—the visionary whole faced by actual fragmentariness—results for Peggy in action, in the movement toward the foreigner, and it may be that the willing engagement with a representative of the foreign begins to realize the vision of hybridity spawned by the carnivalesque figure of queen, bird, tiger, elephant. In the private rooms of Delia and Patrick, in the intimate movement of Peggy’s imagination, the imperial menagerie has been broken down and remade.

MR. BENNETT AND MRS. BROWN AT WEMBLEY

Woolf undertook a comparable deconstruction of the menagerie in the realm of the historical in “Thunder at Wembley.” The occasion of this essay, the Empire Exhibition of 1924, offered up a similar collocation of beasts—including King George V, elephants, monkeys, snakes, and colonial laborers—to a more populist audience than the genteel party in The Years. On 29 May 1924 Virginia and Leonard Woolf yielded to the exhibition’s insistent invitation to “come and tickle monkeys,” as Woolf described it, and to visit “the ancient civilisation of the East” and “the primitive life of the African villages,” as advertisements pitched Wembley. The British Empire Exhibition in Wembley, North London, promised to bring home and into view of some 27 million British subjects a realistic picture of imperial landscapes, people, animals, and goods, fetching up out of the margins of empire a simultaneously fabricated and faithful representation of British holdings across the globe. Within the walled bounds of Wembley, one could view real Australian sheep and ostrich farms, tour a model of the Indian jungle, trace the eastward expansion of the empire by following the long procession of elephants across the Wembley Stadium pitch, and learn “What Tanganyika Can Do” by observing a model of an African elephant. In its displays, the British Empire Exhibition sought to round out a view of the world as a whole, laying before the British people the spectacle of an entire empire in miniature. Like the monstrous figure in Delia and Patrick’s parlor, this fabrication was designed to amuse and delight, but it also provoked a series of significant meditations on the relation of English experience to life in the empire.
Working within the imaginative arenas of the Wembley exhibition and the periodical press, Woolf exposes the exhibition’s realism as a kind of praxis that is complicit with the totalizing aims of imperialism. Her assault on similar realist practices in the novel in “Character in Fiction” figures also as a critique of imperialism, while her essay on the Empire Exhibition titled “Thunder at Wembley” is predicated upon a critique of the exhibition’s economy of realism. This economy posits the world as a sociospatial totality that can be observed by a disengaged spectator without either entailting a loss of meaning or entangling the subject with the world as object. Woolf acknowledges that emergent modernisms appear as incomplete projects, but also that they expose the way the “rounding” of the world—representing it as a coherent, spectacular whole—always leaves in the margins a remainder that undermines realist restricted economies. Modernism’s exposure of this excess enmeshes the subject with “life itself” and gestures toward the impossibility of a singular totality that might be rendered as a spectacle; instead, its “solidity disappears,” “features crumble,” and frameworks “topple to the ground.” If Wembley sought to enchain the unruly “great brute” of twentieth-century imperial politics in the ring of a spectacular realism, Woolf envisions this orientalist spectacle bursting its bonds and spilling the contents of its bloated carcass into the domestic spaces of Englishness.

Criticism has rarely engaged Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Character in Fiction” in terms other than those laid out in the pages of The Nation and the Athenaeum, where Michael Sadleir in February 192 cast the argument as a “duel between Mrs. Woolf” and her antagonists, “with Mr. Arnold Bennett as injured maiden.” Most critics who have subsequently defended Bennett and his mode of realism or upheld Woolf’s position that Edwardian conventions of realism are outmoded have assumed that the contention between Bennett and Woolf was motivated chiefly by personal differences: Woolf railed against Bennett because she was a highbrow and he a lowbrow; Bennett invited her attack when he expressed chauvinistically masculinist views in Our Women: Chapters on the Sex Discord (1920). What has been missed is the degree to which Woolf’s essays engage ongoing elite and popular celebrations and denunciations of realism as a method, particularly as these intensified around the Empire Exhibition of 1924 and occupied the space of the periodical press throughout 192—especially The Nation and the Athenaeum, Punch, the Graphic, and the Illustrated London News.

Woolf’s attack upon Bennett’s work as representative of the Edwardian novel reflects the fact that he explicitly theorized the objectivity of realism and claimed for the novel all the world as its domain, as we saw in chapter 3.
Woolf sought to dismantle the imaginative circuits through which the novel could appear to “adopt the hue of the British Empire,” in Bennett’s conception, when she published the article titled “Thunder at Wembley” in The Nation and the Athenaeum in June 1924, which concludes with a vision of the British Empire dissolving in a tempest. This relatively neglected essay, which Woolf composed shortly after revising and expanding her attack on Bennett in May, has only recently begun to receive significant critical attention, and just as discussions of the better-known “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Character in Fiction” have neglected such problems of imperious (and imperial) representation as appear in Bennett’s claim, so discussions of “Thunder at Wembley” have left unremarked the critique of economies of exhibitionary realism there. The larger complex of texts from 192—Mrs. Dalloway, “Character in Fiction,” and “Thunder at Wembley”—ought to be considered together, since Woolf’s notebooks for Mrs. Dalloway are interleaved with fragments of the expanded version of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and the complete draft of “Thunder at Wembley,” each of which explores the spaces of empire and the modes of representing the real. We get a sense of just how contested this representational terrain is in the modernist period when we consider that at the same time these three documents that seek a new relation to the real were filling out the pages of Woolf’s notebooks, models of the British Commonwealth of Nations were rising in the midst of suburban North London as high-fidelity monuments to the empire as a total sociospatial order.

**Intense Realism and a Little Tour of the Whole World**

The Empire Exhibition sought to rework the themes of an earlier imperialism in order to allay nagging suspicions, raised in The Nation and the Athenaeum, that “our fortunes have passed their zenith” and that contemporary global developments would “precipitate our decay.” The overarching strategy demanded the representation of the empire as an integrated whole, as a synchronic totality, and Wembley—like the other colonial and imperial exhibitions—“emphasized the notion of Empire as an interlocking economic unit.” This monolithic conception of empire appeared also to involve a cultural logic that insisted upon the empire’s singular unity despite its great diversity:

> The more exotic the pavilions the more they thrilled . . . in an endless variety of human types, colour of skin and national costume, and in a
profusion of tongues with which the Tower of Babel itself could not have competed—yet all were members of one great empire, united under one king and flag, linked by the English language, financed by sterling, ruled by British justice and protected by the Royal Navy.52

This sense of a unitary and unified empire, a complete and variegated circuit in itself, permeated the exhibition’s rhetoric,53 and not only in the spectacles shown but also in the labor that produced the display, as the Prince of Wales highlighted in proclaiming to the King at the opening ceremonies that “The Exhibition is . . . the work of the whole Empire, . . . of all our peoples and all our territories.”54 Against this great labor of all the empire were posed the spectators—“creatures of leisure, civilization, and dignity,” Woolf calls them—whom these rhetorics were designed to impress with sentiments auspicious for the future of the empire.55

To the end of persuading domestic subjects of the empire’s continued significance, the Wembley exhibition that the Woolfs encountered “combined entertainment, education, and trade fair on a spectacular scale.”56 The exhibition included pavilions in which more than twenty-five of the lands under British rule offered “exact reconstructions of native villages, actual living flowers, trees, and beasts of strange countries.”57 The “Olde Englishe Faire” section housed the “Menagerie” exhibit proper, which boasted monkeys, dozens of lions, and more than a hundred snakes.58 But the most compelling specimens of exotica were mounted in the national pavilions: Ceylon exhibited elephant heads, buffalo, spotted deer, and pigs; Kenya displayed tusks lent by the King for the exhibit; India promised a model jungle with lions, tigers, and elephants; and Sarawak showed a thirty-foot-long stuffed python that had swallowed a whole pig.59 To a large degree, Wembley reproduced the logic of both the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the zoo in Regent’s Park, and it was mentioned in the popular press alongside both of these precedents in the summer of 1924.60 Unlike these other events and institutions, however, the 1924 exhibition also staged a vast “Pageant of Empire” that promised the largest and grandest historical dramatization ever staged. It included twelve thousand performers and was enacted over three days, portraying the westward, southward, and eastward expansion of the empire and showcasing thousands of actors (among them snake charmers, dervishes, and dancing girls) and native animals—elephants, camels, oxen, llamas, bulls, bears, kangaroos, doves, horses, donkeys, and monkeys—processing across the stadium grounds (fig. 22).

Though the exhibition’s displays and pageants—with stuffed or live beasts—were the work of the whole empire, its design and execution were
also characteristically British: the exhibition’s enormous pavilions were constructed with the new British-engineered material of steel-reinforced concrete by a crew of British builders. A French visitor lamented in *Living Age* that the British “makers have been content with approximations with which we French, accustomed as we are to more care and more minute perfection, would never have been satisfied,” and Roger Fry, surveying Wembley’s architecture in the pages of *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, complained that “It is characteristic of many English artists to be much more concerned with the surface finish of that work than with . . . the design.” Nevertheless, it seemed somehow appropriate that this exhibition should bear the telltale marks of what Arnold Bennett had earlier identified as “the English idiosyncrasy”—“a haphazard particularity.”

Though the planners surely would have denied the charge of haphazardness, the realism of the exhibition implicitly acknowledged its selectivity
in offering portrayals of the empire as a harmonious and profitable unit, and to this extent a distinct economy of realism promoted the interests of a global commercial economy. The logic that the exhibition followed was that of earlier displays—and not only the Great Exhibition of 1851 but also the London Zoological Gardens—where the rule of synecdoche dominated, representing the whole empire through its parts (though at times it resorted to the allegorical, deploying the logic of Astley’s Circus and the Lord Mayor’s Show). Wembley’s planners emphasized the characteristic and the typical in its exhibits, hoping they would, as George V proclaimed during the opening ceremonies, “reveal to us the whole Empire in little, containing within its 220 acres of ground a vivid model of the architecture, art and industry of all the races which come under the British flag.”

The exhibition was a very deliberate effort to place before domestic English subjects a panoramic scene of the empire in its entirety, as part of an effort to stave off a growing sense of imperial stagnation, decline, and decay through a picturesque display that simultaneously cultivated an awe of empire’s sublimity. The novelist G. K. Chesterton promoted this totalizing aspect of the enormous display at Wembley as one of the exhibition’s great selling points when he wrote that “It is to be hoped that people will learn to appreciate what is large precisely because they see it when it is little.” Indeed, the popular press in the spring of 1924 filled its pages with appreciations, reading the exhibition as a faithful if awesome representation of the empire. The Illustrated London News, for instance, described the Hong Kong exhibit in these terms: “There is no ‘fake’ about Hong Kong at Wembley. Every detail was made in the Colony and shipped to England. The result is most picturesque and attractive—a real view of the real China that salutes the British flag.”

In their relentless pursuit of “the real” construed narrowly, the papers tended to hew to the representational strategies of the exhibition, which were designed to offer “a comprehensive survey of the wealth and resources of the British Commonwealth of Nations [and] to reproduce the whole of the Empire in miniature.” From January 1924 the Illustrated London News offered descriptive maps and special artists’ renderings of the entire exhibition; in May it supplied a four-page foldout overview of Wembley; and in July it reproduced aerial photographs of the section of North London, making available the whole of the grounds at one glance. Journalistic realism, like the style of the exhibition, demanded the rendition of Wembley as a whole. A Swedish visitor to Wembley also echoed the official propaganda of Wembley, noting that “Exotica is a large and rich country. Trips to it are both troublesome and expensive, and only a few can hope to see its wonderlands. But this summer a person can make a
little tour of the world and have his fill of exoticism at Wembley. . . . [A]nything is possible in Exotica, and we have the whole world to look at if we like.” The exhibition’s global extension of synecdochic logic served to render accessible “the whole world” through the “little tour,” at the end of which, declared the Official Guide to the exhibition, “You may not have put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes, but you will have done something like it.”

As something like the world’s largest zoo, amusement park, trade show, and “Empire Classroom,” the 1924 Empire Exhibition marked its difference from earlier colonial, imperial, and world exhibitions (a few of which Woolf recollects in “Thunder at Wembley”) chiefly through its claims to greater comprehensiveness, its sheer overwhelming mass, and the intensity of its imperial “lessons.” Wembley’s scale and intensity did not, however, make a uniformly positive impression upon those whose aesthetic sensibilities guided their evaluations of the exhibition. In The Nation and the Athenaeum, Roger Fry lamented the tasteless bombast of the exhibition’s architecture: “An area equal to that of central London has been enclosed, and most of the buildings within it are of abnormal size. . . . In general, one may say that everything is five times as large as the most exorbitant could demand.”

If the tour of Wembley was little and manageable, the representations themselves were designed to engross and impress, in an apparent contradiction “between the need to separate oneself from the world and to render it up as an object of representation, and the desire to lose oneself within this object-world and to experience it directly.”

In part, the “exorbitant,” “abnormal” scale of Wembley served to distinguish further the exhibition from the reality it claimed to reproduce: as one visitor pointed out, “all this splendor is after all nothing but a stage-setting, the representation of the moment in which one pushes to its extreme the Empire’s dignity and splendor.” Even Wembley’s enthusiastic contemporaries understood that its selective realism aimed to produce an “allegory of power and wealth, a significant summing-up of infinite resources on a world-wide scale,” and the engulfing scale was important to this allegorical function.

The “summing-up” of empire in these synchronically patterned totalities, however comprehensive, was designed primarily for the British who could both apprehend and remain unencumbered by the alien spaces of the empire or by any competing representations, and it was as if “the rest of Europe did not count.” The exhibition’s realism appeared, then, as a kind of restricted economy of precise observation bounded in such a way as to conserve and convey meaning in the “schoolroom of the empire,” to the exclusion of all competing representations. Official advertisements for the exhibition touted
the spectacular yet realistic character of the displays, as in one enthusiastic promotion (fig. 23) which announced that

The British Empire Exhibition derives its absorbing interest from its intense realism. Stately and picturesque pavilions are constructed of materials brought from the countries they represent; trees and shrubs and flowers are growing around as they grow thousands of miles away.

. . . When one has watched the making of Indian carpets by native experts, he may witness an Indian play performed by Indian actors in an Indian theatre, or, spellbound, gaze upon an Indian snake charmer compelling a huge cobra to do his bidding.77

English visitors, ostensibly held “spellbound” by the “intense realism” of the spectacle, are nevertheless removed from the more “picturesque” aspects of the exhibition. Their “absorbed interest” is always at a significant remove from the spectacle, apprehending the pavilions and “native experts” as though they were pictures at another sort of exhibition.
The claims of Woolf’s contemporary Bror Centerwall that at Wembley we “have the whole world to look at” epitomize modernity’s exhibitionary epistemology. If the British Empire Exhibition actively aimed to cement a sense of the empire as unitary and uniform, it also presumed that a global empire could be so described. The representation of the world as spectacle consequently is related to the view of the “real” world outside—and if the spectacle inside the exhibition faltered in its realism, it could mean that indeed “one more doubt [was] cast upon the reality of the external world.”

The foundation of this modern economy of realism upon the trope of the “world-as-exhibition” is not peculiar to the colonial and imperial exhibitions but directs literary formulae of the era as well: Arnold Bennett had earlier suggested that the obligation of the novelist is “really to see the spectacle of the world (a spectacle surpassing circuses and even street accidents in sustained dramatic interest).” The realist’s world-as-spectacle thus became the established way of treating or looking at the world; concomitantly, looking at the world through the lenses of “intense realism” came to be established as an imperial way of treating it.

Realist prescriptions for the novel such as Arnold Bennett’s developed during the heyday of colonial and imperial exhibitions, and it is perhaps not coincidental that his conceptions of the novel resemble those strategies of exhibitions designed to foster an intense and engrossing realism, since both the novel and the exhibition share a worldview in which “The so-called real world outside is something experienced and grasped only as a series of further representations, an extended exhibition.” Virginia Woolf ironically reverses this perspective as it pertains to the novel, reducing Bennett’s work itself to a kind of picture: “we must do as painters do when they wish to reduce the innumerable details of a crowded landscape to simplicity—step back, half shut the eyes, gesticulate a little vaguely with the fingers, and reduce Edwardian fiction to a view.” In “Thunder at Wembley,” too, Woolf reduces the realism of Wembley to just one kind of picture, challenging the singularity of the totality represented in the exhibition and in the vision of world-as-exhibition, stressing the way in which the real threatens the restricted economies of realism and entangles imperial spectators with “life itself.”

**Pasteboard Hams and the White Man’s Burden**

In April 1924, in the pages of the same publication that printed “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in December, and in which “Thunder at Wembley”
was soon to appear, E. M. Forster cast his eye upon the construction of the muddy pavilions, villages, and streets that would in short order become the British Empire Exhibition. Before the exhibition even opened, he predicted that “Millions will spend money there, hundreds will make money, and a few highbrows will make fun,” noting that he himself “belong[ed] to the latter class.”

This was by no means a small class, since as John MacKenzie points out, “Much contemporary fun was poked at the exhibition by Punch, the WGTW (Won’t Go To Wembley) Society, by P. G. Wodehouse and Noel Coward.”

We might add Woolf to this class of “highbrows,” for in her Diary she associated Wembley with “the enameled Lady Colefax” who was like “a cheap bunch of artificial cherries . . . on a burnished plate of facts,” and who, while she could not “sink to the depths,” was nevertheless “a superb skimmer of the surface.” Woolf was not alone in perceiving a conventional and insubstantial realism surrounding the exhibition: another visitor compared Wembley’s displays to “those painted pasteboard hams which give a fraudulent fillip to appetite in the show windows of certain delicatessen stores.”

The hilarity at the expense of the Empire Exhibition was, like the amusement at Delia and Patrick’s party, a result of the sometimes bizarre incongruity and juxtaposition of the imagery, but as in the case of the hybrid creature assembled from queen, bird, tiger, the character of the collection also provoked reflection on the nature of the whole.

The insistence on strict if superficial realism at Wembley rendered it vulnerable to criticism and ridicule of precisely this sort, especially at the borders of its economy of realism. Punch’s columnist recorded a tour of the exhibition in which his guide patiently explained that “The whole thing is arranged geographically . . . It’s all been planned like an immense map.” When the journalist wonders “how . . . the rest of the world [is] filled up? The parts that don’t belong to the British Empire, I mean,” his guide replies, “Kiosks and restaurants . . . Restaurants in particular.”

The boundaries of imperial territory consequently appear as the arbitrary circumscribing limit of the exhibition’s representation of the world, and Punch’s inquiry exposes the underpinnings of the exhibition’s “intense realism”—a desire to cultivate imperial consumers and to foster a broader commercial economy by presenting the exhibition itself as “the whole thing.” Punch’s jokes at the expense of the exhibition’s realism frequently treated nonrepresentative features of the exhibition—icicles, the rain, the cold, the restaurants—as part of the exhibition’s realistic display, as when the columnist describes scraping thick mud from his boots, “carefully putting a large piece of empire back on the ground,” and muttering with disgust about “the White Man’s
While realism in the novel may—as Arnold Bennett claimed—have “poached, colonized, and annexed with [undeniable] success,” *Punch* nevertheless probes the boundaries of realism’s annexations and denies that its eminent domain extends anywhere near “the whole thing.”

While *Punch* managed to exploit the representations at the exhibition for a great many jokes, it also drew attention to the gap between the expectations of audiences who anticipated conventional views of Exotica (those fostered by the imperial romance, for instance) and the actual displays resulting from the exhibition’s strategy of calculated realism. After touring the Indian Pavilion, *Punch* directed its sardonic fire at an exhibit of India’s representative minerals:

I can assure you from my own personal knowledge that the popular interest in pirolitic bauxite among ordinary Englishmen has never been at a lower ebb than it is to-day. . . . [G]ive us instead a life-size working replica of a tiger-shoot on elephants, with a background of Indian Jungle and Indian sky. . . . A moving elephant, either alive or mechanical, carrying a howdah, should have been provided, and air-guns charged with darts given to the spectators, who thus from a reasonable range might have experienced some of the thrills and glamour of the East.  

The rhetorical success of the India exhibit, *Punch* suggests, is imperiled by the unimaginative literalism of the display, which does not conform to a picture of India available through the symbolic lenses of orientalism, lenses through which the English largely understood India. “Let us have more Indian snake-charmers and fakirs,” *Punch* demands sarcastically. “Let us have a *pukka suttee* and a car of Juggernaut . . . and above all things, if you can manage it, show us one or two stuffed agitators.” What Virginia Woolf calls the “burnished plate of facts” obscures, *Punch* implies, those imaginative and political relations that obtain between England and India that are more significant in themselves than bits of pirolitic bauxite and, indeed, that might suggest cracks in the empire’s political foundation. In short, the exhibition has too much of the trade show and too little of the zoo, menagerie, or circus.

In evaluating the architectural specimens housing these exhibits, Roger Fry dismissed “the triviality, the niggling pedantry, and want of invention which . . . every one of these buildings displays,” and in her essay on the Empire Exhibition Woolf, too, complains of the lack of imagination in the exhibition. At previous colonial exhibitions, such as the one she attended in July 1903 atEarls Court, she remembered, “Everything was intoxicated and
transformed. But at Wembley nothing is changed and nobody is drunk.”

The “mediocrity” of the Wembley exhibition, according to Woolf, is owed to its attempted realism: its presentation (like Lady Colefax) as “a burnished plate of facts” and its patent factitiousness (“a cheap bunch of artificial cherries”) fail to charm. By contrast with the calculated and ordered realism of the exhibition, Woolf—like Punch’s muddy correspondent—relishes the display of what she calls “Nature” in the exhibition grounds, an uncoordinated, unpredictable, and excessive “Nature” that she claims “is the ruin of Wembley.”

Like the mud, rain, and restaurants in the view of Punch, “Nature” for Woolf exposes the limits of the exhibition’s machinery of representation, its carefully circumscribed economy of realism. By “Nature” Woolf means not just the world of birds and trees and sky but also “our contemporaries”—the English “clergymen, schoolchildren, girls, young men, invalids in bath-chairs” who visit Wembley and use the space to their own ends, not necessarily those of the Empire. By contrast with the monumental places of display encased in ferroconcrete, “they reveal themselves simply as human beings, creatures of leisure, civilization, and dignity; a little languid, perhaps, a little attenuated, but a product to be proud of. Indeed they are the ruin of the Exhibition.” Woolf’s perspective treats the entire exhibition as a display of nature, an alternative collection of creatures that dissolves the artificial boundaries the exhibition depends upon. They destroy the illusion of “intense realism” the exhibition works so hard to establish because they are the observers on whom the illusion depends—to read them as central to the Empire Exhibition is to dissolve the limits of that realism: “As you watch them trailing and flowing, dreaming and speculating . . . the rest of the show becomes insignificant.” The boundaries of realism’s economy are transgressed by the very spectators that realism was designed to dazzle, and Woolf’s vision of the exhibition incorporates the spectator, refusing to acknowledge the comforting distance exhibitionary rhetorics typically fostered. “Nature” for Woolf signals a “dreaming and speculating” excess characteristic of something like what she calls “life itself” in “Character in Fiction,” an excess that is incompatible with the “plate of facts” and “niggling pedantry” served up at the exhibition.

Woolf renders the Empire Exhibition a display of Englishness as much as of empire, a spectacle including the ideally disengaged tourists whom The Graphic advertisement targets in its emphasis upon “intense realism” as the hallmark of the exhibition’s modernity. From this perspective, Wembley chiefly reflects the English character, not that of “a larger world”; “Nature” signals the
human experience in the world, instead of that which is amenable to representation in the age of the world-as-exhibition; and the exhibition’s spatial strategies appear not as genuinely modern, “Georgian” modes of representation but as testaments to the persistence of Victorian convention. In *Orlando* (1928) she characterizes the nineteenth century in terms of the incongruous assemblages of material that appeared with insistence at the Empire Exhibition—for instance, a stroll over the Old London Bridge delivered the tourist into the Taj Mahal, not far from where one might see a refrigerated Prince of Wales rendered in butter. Orlando perceives the nineteenth century as a similar

conglomeration . . . of the most heterogeneous and ill-assorted objects, piled higgledy-piggledy in a vast mound where the statue of Queen Victoria now stands! Draped about a vast cross of fretted and floriated gold were widow’s weeds and bridal veils; hooked on to other excrescences were crystal palaces, bassinettes, military helmets, memorial wreaths, trousers, whiskers, wedding cakes, cannon, Christmas trees, telescopes, extinct monsters, globes, maps, elephants and mathematical-instruments.99

Not only the Victorian “crystal palaces,” with which the Empire Exhibition liked to compare itself, but the heterogeneity, the military display, the globes, the maps, and the elephants—all appear as key features of the 1924 exhibition. According to *Orlando*, “the British Empire came into existence” along with the accession of Victoria to the throne,100 and the largest celebration ever of the empire at Wembley marks the belated culmination of nineteenth-century exhibitionary practices, the hallmark of which was Prince Albert’s Great Exhibition of 1851 itself.

If the Wembley exhibition seemed Victorian to Woolf in its revival of the old imperial themes—the globes and maps and elephants—so also its brand of realism appears outmoded. Woolf champions “Nature” because it exposes the contingency of, for instance, the “real view of the real China” that the *Illustrated London News* celebrated; and because it exceeds the boundaries of the restricted economy of representation that underpins the vision of empire at Wembley. In Woolf’s essay, nature’s excessive and disordering tendencies—particularly in the guise of the torrential rains that ruined the first days of the “Pageant of Empire”—overwhelm the bounds of the exhibition’s realism, reduce the coherence of the concrete displays to ruins, and herald an imperial apocalypse. As “the Massed Bands of empire are assembling and marching to the Stadium” for the “Pageant of Empire,” a wind sweeps in and the sky darkens:
some appalling catastrophe is impending. The sky is livid, lurid, sulphurine. It is in violent commotion. It is whirling water-spouts of cloud into the air; of dust in the Exhibition. Dust swirls down the avenues, hisses and hurries like erected cobras round the corners. Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the colours of its decay. . . . Cracks like the white roots of trees spread themselves across the firmament. The Empire is perishing; . . . the Exhibition is in ruins. 101

Woolf’s vision of imperial destruction here may seem excessively fanciful, but even Punch acknowledged that “It was simply an amazing storm.” If, as the exhibition organizers maintained, the exhibition was to be understood as a “replica” of the empire in its entirety, then Woolf’s reading of the storms at Wembley as foretelling the dissolution of empire is no more outrageous than Punch’s curiosity about what at the cartographically arranged exhibition occupied the spaces of the world the English had not colonized. Apprehending the deluge through Wembley’s logic of realism undermines both the commercial and the symbolic aims of the exhibition—and, Woolf points out, “that is what comes of letting in the sky.” 103

Woolf’s critique differs from Punch’s in a number of respects, but especially in its deliberately difficult, impressionistic, and fragmentary style: she offers what we might term a modernist explosion of Wembley’s logic of realism and its restricted economy of correspondences and exactitudes. The extravagances and difficulties of Woolf’s essay match “Nature’s” own excess in the storms that washed over the exhibition. It is in these stylistic and symbolic senses—the seemingly irremediable losses of the idea of empire as totality, and of the coherence of exhibitionary rhetorics of realism—that Woolf’s imaginative responses to empire open up possibilities of a general (as opposed to restricted) economy of realism, a system of representation in which excess, unaccountable expenditure, and loss are the operative principles. Here that excess figures as the outside of the exhibition that cannot be excluded—human nature, the sky, the weather.

A week before she attended the Wembley exhibition, Woolf had redrafted “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” as “Character in Fiction,” another essay on expenditure, on “smashing and crashing,” and on the question of realism. Against the Wembley organizers’ assertion that the modern element was apparent in the exhibition’s grandeur and enormity, in its ferroconcrete, and in its “intense realism,” in “Character in Fiction” and in “Thunder at
Chapter 4

Wembley” Woolf insists that the Georgian notion of the real is visible in “the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure.”

This position represents a marked break both with the exhibition’s emphasis upon “avoiding formlessness . . . and unrestricted individual effort” and with Arnold Bennett’s admonition against “trivial and unco-ordinated details” and his concomitant emphasis upon the coherence of a “broad notion of the whole.” The mutual point of interrogation in Woolf’s essays, then, is the status of realism’s relation to the flux and excess of the real. “What is reality?” Woolf wonders in “Character in Fiction,” and despite the impossibility of settling the question, she concludes that the business of the novel that would approach the problem cannot be “to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire”—precisely those things that Wembley’s “intense realism” did seek to do. Woolf’s interest in the way in which people live out their lives in spaces such as the suburban train on which Mrs. Brown travels and the grounds of the Empire Exhibition—the way in which they turn physical places, “the fabric of things,” into special and personal spaces in which narrative unfolds—brings her to concentrate her attention on the question of character.

The distinction between physical place as catalogued by the Edwardians and what Woolf casts as lived space in her essays is perhaps key to understanding her treatment of realism as it appears in Bennett’s fiction and in the Wembley exhibition. Woolf concludes that Bennett’s fiction—and that of the Victorians and Edwardians more generally—concerns itself too much with ordering and recording the material trappings and environments of people (placing “an enormous stress on the fabric of things”) and too little with the ways in which people “reveal themselves” within the spaces they construct. “If you hold that novels are in the first place about people,” Woolf writes, “and only in the second about the houses they live in,” then the Edwardians, and Bennett in particular, have missed the mark in giving their readers “a house in the hope that [they] may be able to deduce the human beings who live there.” In the manuscript of “Thunder at Wembley,” Woolf celebrates the exhibition’s travelers because “what has happened is simply that they have been lifted out of streets and houses and set down against an enormous background which reveals them for the first time.” The incompatibility of human nature with “the fabric of things” in “Character in Fiction” is much the same difficulty that Woolf finds arising within the British Empire Exhibition, which gives the English people replicas of colonial buildings but without a concomitant sense of the ways in which real life might unfold in that space—a result of the resolute separation of the spectator from spectacle.
For Woolf, “against the enormous background of ferro-concrete Britain, of rosy Burma,” it becomes clear that the presence of real people living their real lives in the spaces of Wembley must mark “the ruin of the Exhibition”—or at least of its conception of the entire world as an exhibition disengaged from English human nature. Timothy Mitchell understands the exhibition not as dividing spectators directly from the real but rather threading an impression of alienation through the channels of realism: “it creates an effect called the real world, in terms of which we can experience what is called alienation.” At stake is the logic of empire and of the menagerie—even if the displays were participatory, as Woolf’s “Monkey-Teasers” urged, they were designed to demonstrate the dominance of the spectator. For her part, Woolf remakes this aspect of exhibitionary rhetoric so that Wembley becomes not a place with alien pictures of the world on show but the space in which spectators “reveal themselves” in the world. In the process, Woolf relegates what Bennett calls the “whole spectacular and sensual show” of the world to the middle ground, where it becomes just one show among several. In the same way, Woolf makes plain in “Character in Fiction” that human nature “will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born,” posing human nature itself as something that cannot be summed up in what Bennett and exhibition organizers championed as a single, “true perspective.”

Unlike the exhibitionary rhetorics that sought to remove the spectator from the enframed totality of the world, Woolf’s figures become part of several possible worlds, and in place of Wembley’s “summing-up” in an imposing allegory, Woolf offers us at best partial summings-up. As the famous figure Mrs. Brown appears to reveal the Edwardian novelists as having produced merely hollow men rather than characters in “Character in Fiction,” so also she appears in Woolf’s essay on the exhibition, in the guise of “some woman in the row of red-brick villas outside the grounds [who] comes out and wrings a dish-cloth in the backyard,” in a display of everyday waste on the verge of the exhibition. This woman, like Mrs. Brown, shows what the economy of realism must thrust aside in order to establish itself, thereby exposing the exhibition’s illusion of realism by the contact with what Woolf calls in “Character in Fiction” “the spirit we live by, life itself.” In the latter essay, Woolf foregrounds the sound of conventional boundaries such as those the bounds of the exhibition represent dissolving, particularly through her description of Joyce’s “indecency” and “overflowing of superabundant energy” as “smashing and crashing.” Woolf notes that Ulysses “seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that
in order to breathe he must break the windows,” and the “sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction” that Woolf remarks as characteristic of modernism more generally heralds the collapse of the edifices of Edwardian literature, in much the way that the storm’s ominous thunder reduces the empire to dust and fragments.\footnote{117} The destruction of Edwardian literary convention is not effected by crude “Nature,” as in “Thunder at Wembley,” but rather by a different sort of excess: James Joyce’s “savagery” and T. S. Eliot’s “obscurity,” which approximate “the sound of axes.”\footnote{118} These, Woolf suggests, have led the avant-garde charge “to outrage [and] to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society,” a destruction visible wherever “grammar is violated” or “syntax disintegrated.”\footnote{119} The rhetoric of dissolution Woolf deploys in the name of artistic modernism is not hers alone: in a different register, her friend Roger Fry also imagined exploding the exhibition in the name of new aesthetic sensibilities, noting that “if ever a taste for architecture should arise in this country the nation will be asked to foot another large bill for dynamite to blow it all up.”\footnote{120} In the meantime, Fry harbored hope for the “triumph of intelligent barbarism” represented by West Africans at the exhibition “over the last word in civilized ineptitude,” which he takes Wembley to mark.\footnote{121}

The woman who wrings her washcloth in “Thunder at Wembley” stands at the very margins of the exhibition, while Mrs. Brown is situated in the transitional space of the moving suburban train. These mediate, transitory positions mark what has escaped Edwardian realism and exhibitionary representation—that which Woolf codes as Georgian or modernist. The liminal positions that “change . . . the shape, shift . . . the accent, of every scene”\footnote{122} also bear a striking resemblance to what Bill Ashcroft in a remarkable essay calls “the verandahs of meaning”: “In post-colonial discourse the body, place, language, the house of being itself are all ‘verandahs.’ That is, they are a process in which the marginal, the excess, is becoming the actual. The verandah is not the surplus of the building but the excess which redefines the building itself. The verandah is that penumbral space in which articulation takes form, where representation is contested.”\footnote{123} West African “triumph[s] of intelligent barbarism,” James Joyce’s “savagery,” and English filth sluicing to the ground at the edge of Wembley’s manicured grounds signal the kind of shadowy excess that Ashcroft identifies with the postcolonial, noting that “‘The hegemony of the absolute always falls short of the continual supplement, the excess, which is the real.’”\footnote{124} Where Bennett’s and the Empire Exhibition’s representations claim to be absolute, “true,” each of Woolf’s exemplars of the real appears as a supplement or germ that grounds a particular symbolic
economy but exists in a space properly outside it. Inscribing them within a
general economy in her essays, Woolf reveals the way in which conventional
realisms fall short, and in which life on the verandah reduces to “ruins and
splinters . . . this tumbled mansion.” What Ashcroft calls “the hegemony
of the absolute” fails in Woolf’s readings of the Empire Exhibition and of
Edwardian realism not only in the face of colonial subjects such as the name-
less Indian “native experts” or Ireland’s Joyce, but also in the persistence of
the English “real,” a “product to be proud of”—even as it reveals itself in
prosaic “invalids in bath chairs,” “clergymen, and children.”

Ashcroft enables us to name the space Woolf explores between totality and
detotalization, the margin between the exhibition and the display of English
nature, and Bhabha’s “terrain for . . . new signs of identity” as the “verandah.”
The monstrous—like the freakish figure at Delia and Patrick’s party or the
monkeys in the storm—defines the verandah. In short, while “the excess
which is the real” is most apparent in the sublime vision of “beauty and
terror” that the empire’s tempestuous destruction evokes, it also emerges in
the quiet activities of human nature unfolding in the avenues and margins
of Wembley. Ashcroft suggests that “Post-colonial excess is quintessentially
the exuberance of life which is destined to revolt. But the most effective
revolt is the one which denies the system its power over representation.”

This is what “Nature”—especially human nature in Woolf’s essays—accom-
plishes: “the most solemn sights she turns to ridicule; the most ordinary she
invests with beauty.” At stake for Woolf in denying the Empire Exhibition
an unqualified power over representation—even if only in the “highbrow”
printed space of The Nation and the Athenaeum—is the dominance of a
world picture, an epistemological outlook that apprehends the world as exhi-
bition and expresses its force both in imperial sociospatial representation
and in the realist novel that presents “the whole spectacular and sensual
show” of the world.

**Leaden Circles, Jagged Lines, Orts, Scraps, and Fragments**

The apocalyptic vision of empire’s dissolution Woolf presents in “Thunder at
Wembley” as an inversion of the logic of the menagerie unfolded chiefly in the
realm of fancy, given that the stormy summer of 1924 in reality only dampened
the exhibition, rather than bringing it to ruin. And, indeed, the exhibition
reopened in 1925 with a slightly freshened presentation. The provisionality
of Woolf’s fantastic allegory finds an analogue in the form of modernist style, which, as Woolf suggests in “Character in Fiction,” cannot “just at present [offer] a complete and satisfactory presentment” of reality, and Woolf rests at the end of this essay with a view of modernism as “the spasmodic, the fragmentary, the obscure, the failure,” between Edwardian and fully realized new conventions. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” “Character in Fiction,” and “Thunder at Wembley,” though, modernism’s force emerges precisely from its “failure” in conventional terms—because it compromises extant representational economies and practices. While Ashcroft helps name the ground between a “rounded,” totalized world and its dissolution in the face of the real’s excess as the verandah, Woolf herself figures imperial space rather differently. In Woolf’s work in general, and in Mrs. Dalloway in particular, symbols of dissolving circles mark the imaginative space between imperial totality and fragmentation, realism and its excess.

The manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway (still called The Hours in the notebooks) is itself broken up by fragments of “Character in Fiction” and by the draft of “Thunder at Wembley,” called “Nature at Wembley.” It seems only appropriate that in the completed novel Peter Walsh also feels disjointed after his voyage in from India. Like Rhoda’s “proud and splendid province” in The Waves, and like the menagerie’s exotic animals on display at the Empire Exhibition’s “Olde English Faire,” Peter too seems to be conjured up out of one of the “dark,” penumbral spaces of the world. Over the London to which Peter returns, Big Ben’s “leaden circles” sound and then “dissolve in the air,” binding his experience of the city to his place in the imperial scheme of Mrs. Dalloway. As Peter rushes out of the Dalloways’ home, having compromised himself to Clarissa in a moment of vulnerability, he “step[s] down the street, speaking to himself rhythmically, in time with the flow of the sound, the direct downright sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour. (The leaden circles dissolved in the air.)” The content of Peter’s speech, synchronized with the leaden rings, has to do with his self-aggrandizing imperial work: “All India lay behind him; plains, mountains, epidemics of cholera; a district twice as big as Ireland; decisions he had come to alone—he, Peter Walsh.” In this way, London, too, becomes an imperial space for Peter, behind which distant India stands.

Though these leaden circles appear to draw Peter’s thoughts back to India, experiencing the space marked out as the center of the rings—Big Ben, Westminster, and London—becomes an estranging encounter for the Anglo-Indian. “Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been,” Peter observes, “somehow very important. People looked different. Newspapers seemed different,”
and Peter finds that London begins to seem incompatible with his Indian experience. As images of containment, the “leaden circles” seem to promise that imperial relations might be described holistically, and yet as they dissolve in the air they announce the radical contingency of such totalizations and allegorize the inevitable dissolution of the bonds holding the notion of empire together. Peter’s encounter with the imperial city anticipates that of North Pargiter in The Years (1937), the farmer in colonial Africa who returns to London to find himself completely dislocated: “He had a feeling that he was no one and nowhere in particular,” and in a moment of utter disorientation he registers not a position in space but rather that “somebody had chalked a circle on the wall with a jagged line in it.” Woolf’s spreading circles encompass the territory they push across, but as they widen they simultaneously diminish in power, receding back into the “pale shadows on the utmost horizon” that Rhoda seeks to illuminate in The Waves. As images of containment, the “leaden circles” seem to offer the possibility that imperial relations might be bound within a totalizing figure, and yet as they dissolve in the air they announce the radical contingency of such totalizations. The imperial center as Woolf draws it—whether in Peter’s and North’s Londons, or in Wembley’s British Empire Exhibition—asserts its force in the world only to have its power dissipate, its ambitions crossed as by some “jagged line,” by some sign of excess.

In “Thunder at Wembley” Woolf presents a vision of the empire as a synchronic totality demolished by the storms of 1924; in Between the Acts she offers in Miss La Trobe’s play a disruption of the kind of diachronic narrative presented in the “Pageant of Empire.” The broken circles and ruptured visions of totality that appear throughout Woolf’s writing are often accompanied by a pervasive melancholy, a melancholy that responds to a profound sense of loss—of meaning, of imaginative power, and even of the self. This loss is most often figured as a lost center: “the old cronies” complain, after Miss La Trobe’s mirrors reveal the spectators as “orts, scraps and fragments,” that “What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together.” The Reverend Mr. Streatfield echoes this point of view about Miss La Trobe’s pageant: “To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole. . . . Scraps, orts and fragments! Surely, we should unite?” But such unity around a center is not a real interpretive possibility offered the audience in Miss La Trobe’s pageant, nor a narrative luxury afforded the readers of Woolf’s last novel. In The Waves, in the most striking instance of such a coordinating center, Percival himself is lost. Percival dies in an accident in India, removing from the narrative the imperialist
who Rhoda claims “is like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm. Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came.” Such losses do not manifest themselves in the way that, for example, profligate expenditures tend to at the Bursley wakes or at Lord Curzon’s Durbar; they are certainly not economic in any simple pecuniary sense. The “expenditures” in Woolf’s fiction are imaginative ones, composed as they are of spatial and systemic absences, losses that nevertheless serve to structure a symbolic economy in Woolf’s writing. It is in this symbolic sense—of the seemingly irremediable loss of the whole, of the centered self, and even of the symbol’s adequacy to mean (though not to have significance)—that Woolf’s imaginative responses to the imperial menagerie in particular and imperialism more generally open up considerations of what Georges Bataille calls “general economy,” his figuration of a system predicated upon loss.

In the Shadow of the Verandah: Eclipsing the Central Star

In 191, beyond the bounds of Virginia Woolf’s writing career, Carl Sandburg noted that Woolf had remade the places of empire in her work as a kind of festival space: “The British Empire—her special and personal Empire—floats and sways as a bundle of toy balloons.” As I hope to have shown in these pages, if Woolf’s “personal British Empire” in any way seems a “bundle of toy balloons,” these are balloons that round themselves only to burst, like the leaden skies over Wembley in the summer of 1924. If Woolf made “personal” the British Empire, it is equally the case that the empire had a personal claim on her as well. In Leonard Woolf, of course, she married an ambivalent former colonial administrator. But her great-grandfather James Stephen married into the Wilberforce family and worked with the Clapham Sect to abolish the slave trade and to convert “heathens.” More notably still, Woolf’s grandfather Sir James Stephen has been called a “founder of Victorian imperialism” for his work in the Colonial Office. One of Sir James’s most enduring accomplishments is his totalizing characterization of the relation between Britain and its imperial holdings as that between a mother and her children; Sir James Stephen is widely credited with the popularization in colonialist discourse of the phrase “the mother country” to describe England. Consequently, by the time Virginia Woolf matured as a writer, she was conscious of two related sets of tropes entailed upon her by her Victorian
ancestors and literary predecessors, tropes that describe the spatial relations within the British Empire as a totality and that were freshly deployed by her contemporaries at the Empire Exhibition. One set describes England as the “mother country” and casts subject imperial spaces in the role of progeny, discrete entities bound to England through filial ties. The other set maps the empire as a space circumscribed by a great circle, the center of whose compass is “the mother country” itself.

The Waves, the novel in which elephants appear both menacing and decaying, offers a double vision in which women desire empire at precisely the moment empire threatens to collapse, highlighting the penumbral space of the verandah between imperial holism and dissolution. “A melodrama for beset imperialists,” The Waves is set largely at the heart of empire and takes a cyclical frame, following the sun across the sky from dawn to dusk through to the promise of a new dawn. Bernard, perhaps the narrator of the novel, pairs the act of telling stories with acts of totalization. As Bernard, Jinny, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, and Susan dine with Percival before he departs for India, Bernard wonders, “what are stories? Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passing through another.” This act of creation, of producing narratives as fragile wholes, is connected with another totalizing act of creation, for, he observes, “We are creators. . . . We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road.” Percival’s death in India shatters this illusion, however, and Bernard finds the possibility of holism smashed, concluding that “We have destroyed something by our presence . . . a world perhaps.” By the end of Bernard’s final section of narrative, darkness has spread over the “illumined and everlasting road,” and he wonders, “How then does light return to the world after the eclipse of the sun? Miraculously. Frailly. In thin stripes. . . . It is a hoop to be fractured by a tiny jar.” As in The Years, in which North finds the circle that should give him his bearings canceled by the jagged line, Bernard finds English light a fragmented, unstable thing. As the book rounds upon itself as a new day begins, Bernard concludes that “The canopy of civilisation is burnt out. . . . There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn.” In rewriting the totalizing Victorian trope in which England appeared as the brilliant center of a solar system, Bernard develops a sense of the fragility and contingency of empire, and Britain’s radiance is eclipsed, its luminescence “burnt out.” For Bernard, the fragile light of an Englishness under eclipse appears as a blind spot, a dark heart of an imperial existence: “What does the central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know.” The brilliance of Viceroy Curzon’s metaphor of the “central star,”
the cynosure around which the empire revolves, is replaced by the “central shadow” of Englishness in eclipse, in a revision that recalls Marlow’s ominous characterization of London as “one of the dark places of the earth” in *Heart of Darkness*.

Yet it is not Bernard but Rhoda and Louis whose identities are most tightly bound up with the British Empire and whose language relies most heavily upon a rhetoric of rings and centers. During a math lesson Rhoda discovers that “The figures mean nothing . . . The clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert . . . The long hand has marched ahead to find water . . . Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it. . . . The world is entire.” Rhoda’s loops are literally totalizing figures, enabled by the colonial progress of time, and she conceives of the six “characters” in the novel as circling Percival, the imperialist, as minnows around a stone cast in a pond. Louis, Rhoda’s lover, presents a colonial counterpoint to Rhoda’s impulses. Because his father is a banker in Brisbane, Louis feels himself outside, though subject to, the machinations of English society. Where Rhoda imagines that she encompasses a world in her chalk figures, Louis contends that her mind merely “steps through those white loops into emptiness.” For Louis, the circle of empire that excludes him appears seamless, though he would like to find an aperture through which he might feel himself part of the center. He wonders, “Where then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster? The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. . . . I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included.” Louis also realizes that his desire for inclusion in the “English Adventure” is a dangerous one, for he discovers in the end that “Life has been a terrible affair for me. I am like some vast sucker, some glutinous, some adhesive, some insatiable mouth. I have tried to draw from the living flesh the stone lodged at the centre.”

Where Rhoda’s desire to be “allowed to spread in wider and wider circles . . . that may at last . . . embrace the entire world” leads to painful longings and her eventual suicide, Louis’s desire for the center—for Englishness itself—is presented as equally horrific. As the circles advance yet diminish in an ever-widening sweep, the center itself appears under eclipse.

For Woolf the margins in which these figures expand and retreat is, like the railway carriage in which Mrs. Brown travels or the yard in which the woman wrings a dishcloth at the edge of the Empire Exhibition, the transitional space of the verandah—the arena in which the empire itself is dissipated as an inheritance. This dissipation is precisely to be celebrated alongside the
bloated, decomposing elephant and the apocalypse at Wembley, as Peggy suggests in *The Years* in thinking about “living differently,” in her incomplete vision of a new, postimperial wholeness. This vision’s incompleteness does not trouble Woolf, for she like Peggy is content for the moment with an “in-betweenness,” the suspension between empire as dissolving whole and a newly constituted postimperial holism. This “in-betweenness” finds expression in the form of modernist stylistics, which, as Woolf suggests in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” cannot “just at present [offer] a complete and satisfactory presentment” of reality. In Woolf’s own fiction, symbols of dissolving circles and menacing and decomposing elephants serve to organize energies of imperial detotalization. Such detotalization, as in Bernard’s consideration of the “fractured” nature of postimperial light that emerges “in thin stripes,” also suggests that the diachronic totality of progressivist narrative is crossed by its other, so that loss and gain appear as complementary aspects of imperial dissolution and are bound up in a kind of general economy. This general economic devolution appears simultaneously as a kind of progress toward a new and whole world, of which the merest glimpses can be seen as in Peggy’s vision in *The Years*, and in *Between the Acts* as a return to prehistory, to the primitive, to the “night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.” Late modernism appears as an era of decomposing elephants and the eclipse of Englishness; yet it also remains haunted by an era before camels, elephants, and monkeys marched across the pitch of Wembley and settled their bloated carcasses on the verandahs of realism for good.